

**Plumage From Pegasus:
Galley Knaves**
by Paul Di Filippo

“How do you get your author’s ARC to stand out in a stack? Make it look like something other than a book, for starters. This is the tack St. Martin’s Minotaur imprint has taken with Chelsea Cain’s forthcoming serial killer mystery, *Heartsick*. Four thousand galleys, stuffed in clear ‘evidence’ packets, were mailed to booksellers and the press last week, making the September novel look as if it was culled from the scene of a crime. (Adding to that aesthetic is the title’s plain white cover splashed with red blotches made to look like bloodstained fingerprints.)”

—“Minotaur Gets Inventive with New ARC,” Rachel Deahl, *PW Daily*,
4/11/2007.

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The doorbell rang just as I was finishing a review for *The Washington Post Book World*: Soho Crane’s new serial killer mystery, *Liverfluke*. (The novel had been holding my interest right up until the climax, when the killer was revealed to be an extraterrestrial intelligent parasitic worm. I really can’t stand science fiction, even when hybridized with the mystery genre.)

I suspected that the bell signaled the arrival of the postal delivery person. The hour was just about right. Most days, the postal person just quietly filled the giant lidded plastic tub on my porch with that day’s shipment of packages, then left. But if a signature was needed, or the bin overflowed with book-stuffed padded envelopes and boxes exposed to inclement weather, I’d get buzzed.

I left my study and headed to the front of the house.

I unlocked the door and looked out.

A bloody corpse sprawled akimbo across my door mat!

Despite being a hardened reader of thrillers, I’m not ashamed to confess that I let out a guttural cry of horror!

Perhaps if I lived in a rough neighborhood, I would have been inured to such sights. But steady employment as a full-time mystery book reviewer had allowed me to buy a large splendid house in an exclusive district of my

town. (And if you believe that, then I've got a plagiarized undergraduate novel to sell you!) Actually, although the street where I rented my apartment ran along the border of a questionable precinct, it was generally respectable and crime-free.

That's why I was so surprised at this ghoulish intrusion.

I was frantically digging my cell out of my pants pocket to call 911, when I looked up and spotted the U.S. Mail truck, parked a few feet away. Next to it stood my regular delivery person, grinning broadly.

"I had to ride around all morning with that damn stiff in my truck. Thought you should get some of the same excitement."

Then he climbed behind the wheel and motored off.

With calmer eyes and slowing heartrate, I regarded the "corpse."

It proved to be a cheap-looking, flexible, life-sized mannequin, with painted-on clothing. A postage-meter strip was pasted to its forehead, and the address label was attached in the form of a hello my name is label on its chest.

I lugged the lightweight mannequin inside.

I noted then a dotted line across its stomach that proclaimed slice open here.

A kitchen knife secured access to the dummy's cavity.

Inside was an ARC, and publicity materials.

"Kentucky Canebrake's new crime opus, *The Corpse Always Rings Twice*, hits with all the impact of a drive-by shooting on your doorstep...."

My initial fear and disgust at this stunt began to fade, to be replaced with grudging admiration for the publicist's ingenuity. There was no way I'd soon forget the arrival and existence of this particular book. Of course, any review of mine would still have to focus objectively on the book's innate qualities....

I added *The Corpse Always Rings Twice* to the top of my queue of possible review candidates.

But now I was faced with disposal of the “packaging.” It would never fit intact into my trash bin, and would certainly look quite startling sticking out.

So, feeling like a real criminal, I chopped the mannequin up into pieces, bagged them, and dumped them outside.

Little did I anticipate that this was just the start of a flood of “different” ARCS.

Other publishers eventually noticed that Kentucky Canebrake’s latest book seemed to garner a larger-than-expected number of reviews, and determined to secure the attention of reviewers with similarly outrageous packages.

Over the next several months, among dozens of macabre galleys, I received prepublication mysteries disguised as a dead sheep atop a hay bale (*The Silage of the Lambs*); a raw side of beef (*Until the Cows Come Home*); an arson-ruined dollhouse (*MacMansion Murders*); a sackful of plastic severed wimpled heads (*Two Heads are Deader than Nun*); and an actual tombstone weighing several hundred pounds accompanied by a real coffin (empty except for the ARC, thank God; this last presentation was for a sequel-by-other-hands to Chester Himes’s series about Coffin Ed Johnson and Grave Digger Jones, wherein the two funky detectives had to solve a prep-school murder: *Groton Comes to Harlem*).

Some of the books receiving this elaborate treatment were good, others not so. But that was hardly the issue any longer. The issue was the headaches involved for me in unwrapping and disassembling these packages. More and more of my week began to be filled with tedious removal of books from elaborate housings, and then bundling up the waste for disposal. (And I paid a per-bag municipal trash fee!)

But how could I avoid this onerous new duty? My whole livelihood was reviewing, and I couldn’t very well ask to be removed from the list for free books....

Inspiration for a possible solution struck in the oddest manner.

One day I had just stepped outside to retrieve my mail when an object sailed through the air and hit me in the head. Luckily, it was a soft thing and caused no harm.

I picked up the object: it was a mock brick fashioned of Nerf foam with a note attached. The note said, "Get ready to receive your copy of George Pelacanos's brutal noir retelling of O. Henry's *The Ransom of Red Chief*..."

My postal person was stifling his laughter from across the street. "They paid the Post Office five cents extra per unit to throw it at the customer!"

I shook my fist at him. "No Xmas gift for you this year!"

But I should have thanked him, because the mild blow to my head had dislodged an idea.

I always submit tearsheets of my reviews to the publishers. A simple Xeroxed page in a business-sized envelope.

But not anymore.

I'd see how the publicists liked receiving, for instance, a bad review stuffed inside a wheel of smelly cheese or wrapped around some fish, and a good one accompanied by a bottle of cheap perfume with the stopper left slightly awry in transit.

And if these mild tactics failed, I could always pull one, possibly two, van Goghs.